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"To Tell the Truth:  
The Challenge of Military Leadership"

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## The Story of Regulus, retold by James Baldwin

On the other side of the sea from Rome there was once a great city named Carthage. The Roman people were never very friendly to the people of Carthage, and at last a war began between them. For a long time it was hard to tell which would prove the stronger. First the Romans would gain a battle, and then the men of Carthage would gain a battle, and so the war went on for many years.

Among the Romans there was a brave general named Regulus -- a man of whom it was said that he never broke his word. It so happened that after a while, Regulus was taken prisoner and carried to Carthage. Ill and very lonely, he dreamed of his wife and little children far away beyond the sea, and he had but little hope of ever seeing them again. He loved his home dearly, but he believed that his first duty was to his country, and so he had left all, to fight in this cruel war.

He had lost a battle, it is true, and had been taken prisoner. Yet he knew that the Romans were gaining ground, and the people of Carthage were afraid of being beaten in the end. They had sent into other countries to hire soldiers to help them. But even with these they would not be able to fight much longer against Rome.

One day some of the rulers of Carthage came to the prison to talk with Regulus.

"We should like to make peace with the Roman people," they said, "and we are sure that, if your rulers at home knew how the war is going, they would be glad to make peace with us. We will set you free and let you go home, if you will agree to do as we say. In the first place, you must tell the Romans about the battles which you have lost, and you must make it plain to them that they have not gained anything by the war. In the second place, you must promise us that, if they will not make peace, you will come back to your prison."

"Very well," said Regulus, "I promise you that if they will not make peace, I will come back to prison."

And so they let him go, for they knew that a great Roman would keep his word.

When he came to Rome, all the people greeted him gladly. His wife and children were very happy, for they thought that now they would not be parted again. The white-haired Fathers who made the laws for the city came to see him. They asked him about the war.

"I was sent from Carthage to ask you to make peace," he said. "But it will not be wise to make peace. True, we have been beaten in a few battles, but our army is gaining ground every day. The people of Carthage are afraid, and well they may be. Keep on with the war a little while longer, and Carthage shall be yours. As for me, I have come to bid my wife and children and Rome farewell. Tomorrow I will start back to Carthage and to prison, for I have promised."

The Fathers tried to persuade him to stay.

"Let us send another man in your place," they said.

"Shall a Roman not keep his word?" answered Regulus. "I am ill, and at the best have not long to live. I will go back as I have promised."

His wife and children wept, and his sons begged him not to leave them again.

"I have given my word," said Regulus. "The rest will be taken care of."

Then he bade them goodbye, and went bravely back to the prison and the cruel death which he expected.

This was the kind of courage that made Rome the greatest city in the world.

## **Introduction**

The story of Regulus, while certainly apocryphal, nevertheless illustrates a fundamental tension of military leadership -- the moral imperative for military leaders to tell the truth, even when that truth has dire consequences for the teller. In our study of strategy and military operations we examine the proposition that no strategy is stronger than its moral foundation, and that, in a democracy, strategic success or failure will ultimately be defined in moral and ethical terms. Morality and ethics are too large and complex subjects to be addressed in this paper. My purpose here is to focus on the need for military leaders to speak the truth, the tension this need causes when faced with opportunities for ethical abuse and the implications this need has for strategy. It is my thesis that a successful strategist must have a well-developed moral and ethical foundation to guide him, not only in his personal life but also in his professional duties. A failure to see, know and speak the truth, regardless of personal consequences, is a sure path to ruin and disaster.

## **Ethical Foundations**

There are many definitions of ethics. The one I shall use here is “the study of human actions in respect to their being right or wrong.”<sup>1</sup> In determining right from wrong, most of us are formed by our upbringing and religious inclination. In this sense our ethics are certainly determined by our cultural environment. For most Americans, this means a Judeo-Christian heritage. In this construct all forms of human life are equally endowed by the Creator with worth and dignity. All are equal, not necessarily in ability or goodness,

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<sup>1</sup> Buckingham, Clay T., ‘Ethics and the Senior Officer: Institutional Tensions’, *Parameters*, Autumn, 1985

but *in the eyes of God*. It follows logically from this that the taking of life is inherently wrong and the preservation of life is good. Taken in absolute terms, there can be no exceptions to this precept. Killing is wrong, no matter what the circumstances. However, life is more complicated than that. Circumstances do arise when force is the only resolution to strongly held conflicting beliefs. How do we decide if those circumstances warrant violating our fundamental faith? Do the ends justify the means? Can we rationalize doing evil to achieve a noble end? Is it excusable to utilize moral means, but fail to achieve a moral result? Clearly they are equally competing concerns. Common defense is an honorable purpose, but misrepresentation of an enemy threat cannot be justified by the belief that it is necessary in order to acquire funding for an important weapon system. Is it sufficient to intervene in say, Somalia, for the highest moral reasons, even though we fail in the end to produce a moral result?

### **Ethics Applied to the Military**

There exists then, a fundamental tension for the soldier who is committed by moral composition to preserving life but who must, in time of war, by necessity destroy it. Just War theory seeks to rationalize and mitigate this tension, and provide for us a moral construct whereby this tension can be resolved. The concept of *jus ad bellum*, or “the justice of going to war” seeks to answer the question, “when is it acceptable to resort to force (war) to achieve political ends?”<sup>2</sup> The requirements needing to be satisfied before a state may participate in a just war include “that it be expected to produce a preponderance of good over evil, that it have a reasonable hope of success, that it be the

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<sup>2</sup> For numerous examples see Michael P. Walzer, *Just and Unjust War*, 2nd Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

last resort, and that its expected outcome be peace ”<sup>3</sup> These are questions that a democracy must answer with informed debate amongst its citizens, its political leaders, and with the advice of its military leaders Military officers as citizens are part of this debate, and their counsel is all the more valuable because they are the ones most familiar with war and its consequences Samuel Huntington’s book, *The Soldier and the State*, proposes the officer corps as a professional organization <sup>4</sup> Like other professional organizations, it establishes, certifies, and maintains standards of competence and appropriate conduct for its members “These standards are not merely technical, they apply as well to ethics, duty and honor It is precisely this sense of duty and mission -- providing guidance as to what is permissible and what is not, what is heroic and what is cowardly, foolish, or shameful -- that elevates the military endeavor to the status of a profession ”<sup>5</sup> Ethics therefore, are a central feature to this debate on the decision to go to war, and honesty must be the linchpin of those ethics, lest a nation go to war for falsely articulated reasons

Soldiers are more comfortable with that other facet of Just War Theory, *Jus in Bello*, or justice in war These requirements are easy to state -- proportionality and discrimination -- but difficult to execute That is, to act honorably (justly) in war, one must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants, and apply force in character and volume consistent with the desired political outcome The line between combatants and non-combatants is increasingly blurred in modern war Nuclear weapons and

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<sup>3</sup> Joel H Rosenthal, “Today’s Officer Corps A Repository of Virtue in an Anarchic World?” *Naval War College Review* Autumn 1997

<sup>4</sup> Samuel P Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, Mass Harvard University Press, 1957)

<sup>5</sup> Joel H Rosenthal, *op cit*

strategies relying on deterrence hold entire populations at risk. Where is the discrimination (or indeed the proportionality) in massive retaliation? Even precision weapons offer little moral refuge, as they may malfunction and fall on unintended innocents, or be used against misidentified targets. The Gulf War saw several instances of precision weapons causing indiscriminate damage in these ways.<sup>6</sup> Even if used properly, the selection of a particular target may have discrimination implications. A cruise missile might precisely hit its intended power plant target with no immediate collateral effects, but the resulting power loss may doom those on life support in the hospital served by that power plant. Changes to the traditional notions of threat blur these distinctions even further, as terrorists hidden in local populations become the target of military action. Once again, the soldier is challenged by the ethical demands that he has placed upon himself for *jus in bello*. His dilemma is that he cannot strip himself of his ethical construct, for fear of becoming that which he despises, yet his ethical construct may prevent him from taking the action which he knows to be his duty to the state.

In such a quandary, truth must prevail. Truth will be the touchstone that guides the soldier through this ethical conundrum. This again is easy to say, but hard to do. To see the truth, understand the truth, speak the truth, and carry out the truth, regardless of where it might lead -- this is the goal. What then, is the nature of the truth and the lie?

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the Al Firdos bunker incident, as well as Tomahawk final attack malfunctions.

## Lying

Is it ever right to lie?<sup>7</sup> Lying here is defined as having one thing in one's heart and uttering another with the intent to deceive. Philosophers and moralists have wrestled with this question for centuries. Immanuel Kant, Thomas Aquinas, and St. Augustine held that all lies were immoral, an affront against God. Their philosophy held that NO lie was ever justifiable, no matter what the circumstances. This philosophy is powerful and clear: "The truth is bright, simple, the Holy Grail of Rationality, while dishonesty is dark and devious, the path to irrationality and confusion."<sup>8</sup> While attractive in the absolute, this philosophy is unworkable for modern life. Obviously, some lies are better than the truth. Some lies are indeed beneficial. What we call "little white lies" are often the social glue which holds our society together. Everyone lies to some extent. Lies are told from kindness ("Your speech was great" or "your haircut looks nice") and from convenience ("Can't make it, conflicting appointment"). People lie to avoid embarrassment ("I'm sure I never saw that memo"), to save marriages ("I love you too"), to save face ("I was going to quit anyway"), to give hope ("I'm sure you will recover from your illness") and to defeat enemies ("I will not attack you there"). While these are at times trivial, some other lies are more important. Consider the lie to protect the innocent. Suppose you are hiding Jews from the Gestapo. They knock on your door and ask if there are any Jews hiding there. Is it moral to lie to them? Certainly it must be. How could you justify telling the truth in this case?

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<sup>7</sup> For the majority of this discussion I am indebted to the classic Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage Books 1978). All public officials, especially military officers, should commit it to memory.

<sup>8</sup> Robert C. Solomon, "Is It Ever Right to Lie? The Philosophy of Deception" *Point of View* 1996.



Sissela Bok discusses three situations where liars might claim to be excused for their lie -- a crisis where overwhelming harm can be averted only through deceit, complete harmlessness and triviality to the point where it seems absurd to quibble about whether a lie has been told, and the duty to particular individuals to protect their secrets.<sup>9</sup> The danger, as she eloquently describes, is that lies in time of crisis can expand into vast practices where the harm to be averted is less obvious and the crisis less and less immediate, how white lies can shade into equally vast practices no longer so harmless, with equally cumulative costs, and how lies to protect individuals and to cover up their secrets can be told for increasingly dubious purposes to the detriment of all.<sup>10</sup>

She then goes on to describe what she calls the most dangerous lie of all, the lie which is of most concern for us here. This is the lie told to advance the public good. Plato called this "The Noble Lie", in which the citizens are told a fanciful story about how God created different types of people to do different jobs. The intent of the lie is a noble one -- for society to live in a harmonious hierarchy. The rationale here is that lying is excusable when undertaken for "noble" ends by those trained to discern these distinctions.<sup>11</sup> Ruling elites, including military leaders, have taken this justification for their own purposes, some even insisting that they have a *right* to lie. They tell their lies believing that they have a greater or better understanding of the truth than the masses and that such a lie is for the benefit of the state.

Consider the Johnson administration's strategy for re-election in 1964. That

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<sup>9</sup> Sissela Bok, *op cit* pp. 175

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*. Disraeli once remarked that "a gentleman is one who knows when to tell the truth and when not to."

administration had a plan for vastly expanding the war in Vietnam. It was decided that the public knowledge of such a plan would jeopardize the election against Goldwater, who was running on a hawkish platform. Despite a plan to expand the war, Johnson ran on a platform of peace. His administration felt that their informed understanding of the situation in Vietnam outweighed any responsibility for truthfulness to an uninformed electorate. On behalf of their self-defined greater public good they felt justified in their deceit. History has judged them differently. Sissela Bok concludes her piece by asserting that high public (read military) office does not excuse lying, quite the contrary. "Some lies -- notably minor white lies and emergency lies rapidly acknowledged -- may be more *excusable* than others, but only those deceptive practices which can be openly debated and consented to in advance are *justifiable* in a democracy."<sup>12</sup>

### **Challenges for the Military Leader**

The soldier might well ask, "What's all this philosophy stuff got to do with strategy and tactics?" Everything. Military officers often begin their careers at military academies or ROTC units that insist that "a cadet shall not lie, cheat or steal." Upon commissioning we *swear* "To support and defend the Constitution of the United States." The moral justification for our profession is embedded in the Constitution -- "to provide for the Common Defense." In a realist world enemies who do not share our regard for human life or our moral code threaten that common defense. Our best way of providing the Common Defense is to be strong enough to deter, strong enough to compel if deterrence fails, and strong enough to impose a better peace once victory is achieved. "Ours is an honorable profession with an ethical purpose entirely consistent with our basic view that whatever

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid Pp 191

protects and enhances life is good.”<sup>13</sup> This code of ethics, while not formalized, does provide the soldier with a moral backbone to help him with his dilemma, previously stated -- how to preserve and enhance life by sometimes destroying it. Honesty is at the core of this moral framework. It provides a clear path to understanding in a morally troubled and ambiguous environment.

For the military officer, the tensions of truth and lying are presented on an almost daily basis. Consider the issue of readiness reporting. Every military unit must report its level of training and readiness for combat. Our command authorities must depend upon truthful reporting to correctly evaluate our national capabilities. Moreover, every unit commander desires to report high levels of training and readiness to appear diligent to those who evaluate him and eventually decide his potential for promotion. Nearly all commanders (presumably) honestly desire their units to be at the highest possible readiness levels, since that is a prime duty of the commander. The problem is that these interests are assaulted from many sides by many competing equities.

While training and readiness is the result of hard work and sacrifice, the commander is also responsible for the health, safety, and well being of those under his command. The commander's concern for his troops tells him that they deserve a weekend off for rest and relaxation, but the demands of training insist that they work. How is the commander to reconcile these competing concerns? Only by honest evaluation of the truth, and the courage to follow it, regardless of the consequences to him personally, can the commander see the way. This requirement will always be situational, and in the analysis of these situations we trust our commanders. Allowing the unit a weekend off may lower

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<sup>13</sup> Clay T. Buckingham, *op cit*

readiness. It may however, be what the unit needs to allow it to train to higher levels in the future. This dilemma is the fundamental ethical tension between people and mission, which is a constant facet of military life.

A missile hits a ship in combat. The damage control assistant reports to the Captain that he must flood the magazine in order to prevent explosion. The DCA also reports that there are men in the magazine who cannot escape when it floods. With the magazine flooded the ship can no longer contribute to the fight raging all around it. If the magazine is not flooded the ship might explode, taking all hands down with it. Which takes priority, the people or the mission? What if the DCA's report is not entirely honest or is incomplete? Is the truth important here?

How shall the commander report his training and readiness? We would hope that he would do so truthfully, but again he sometimes faces competing equities. Consider the following example. A Navy Strike Fighter squadron has just finished a six-week fleet air-defense exercise. During this exercise the squadron flew extensively, but exclusively, air-defense missions. The squadron is preparing to deploy overseas and must report its readiness status. While the extensive fleet air defense training allows the commander to report high levels of air defense readiness, the exercise, dictated by higher authority, allowed no time for the squadron to train in other mission areas. Upon calculating the formulas, the squadron commander finds that he must report deficient levels of readiness in strike and interdiction mission areas, levels so deficient as to prevent deployment. He is now faced with an ethical choice. On the one hand, he can tell the whole truth, that he is mission-capable in air defense but not in the areas of strike and interdiction. If he does, the squadron, which has been working very long and hard hours in preparation for

deployment, “will look bad” Moreover, the commander’s immediate senior will hold him personally responsible for the deficiency The fact that the air defense exercise was required and offered no opportunity for other training is no excuse The hard work of the squadron’s troops will go for naught, the commander’s career is probably over due to his senior’s displeasure, and another squadron will have to take the deficient squadron’s place All of this is at enormous cost for the taxpayer, the Fleet Commander, the other squadron, and the families of the other squadron now subjected to an unscheduled six-month deployment

On the other hand, the squadron commander can rationalize a lie He is, after all, allowed some latitude in training and readiness reporting for commander’s judgment, although not enough in this case to override the facts If he does lie, he will be personally rewarded -- he attained superior results under “difficult” circumstances After all, he rationalizes, “we will have opportunities on deployment to regain our readiness status The world is quiet right now Our chances of actually having to perform strike and interdiction missions are slight Isn’t it in the public interest for me to report that we are ready for deployment?” To push his hand further, his immediate senior orders the squadron commander to report a readiness level that is sufficient for deployment Now the commander is faced with an even greater quandary “Do I obey orders, or tell the truth? Both are required by Naval Regulations as well as by my moral code I cannot do both in this situation ”

How does this (true story) get resolved? How does the commander obey two competing moral imperatives? In this case, the commander discussed his dilemma with his immediate senior, the Carrier Air Wing Commander (CAG in the jargon) The CAG

agreed that the public interest was not served by telling the complete truth. Recognizing that the reporting system mechanics did not cover this situation, the squadron commander reported the truth to the CAG, but only to the CAG. He was morally “let off the hook.” The CAG then chose to interpret his subordinate’s findings and used his authority to report the squadron to the Fleet Commander at a level sufficient to allow deployment. No combat ensued, no one was embarrassed, and no one suffered professionally. We might rightly ask however, if the public good was served, particularly if this event helped create a climate in which the readiness reporting system becomes a sham that no one trusts and therefore no one uses. Decision-makers rely on truthful and complete information from subordinates. They may make wrong decisions even if given the truth, but their chances of making the wrong decision are greatly increased if they receive deliberately inaccurate or incomplete reports.

What about the squadron’s junior officers? They just saw their commander faced with a choice, and saw their CAG fabricate a statement of fact that they know to be false. Now what is their level of faith in their seniors and how will their ethical choices in the future be shaped? When ordered into life or death combat situations, how will they respond?

This truth in reporting issue is not limited to the operational area or the battlefield. In the programming and budgeting world, the telling of lies, half-truths, and selective memory is rampant. In proposing budgets, nearly every branch inflates the dollar amounts required for their program. In their eyes this is not really a deception, but a tactic, since they all know that they will never get the full amount they ask for, even if they deserve it. Instead they inflate their request in hopes of being cut back to what they really need. The problem here is not so much the deception itself, but the total perversion of an entire

budgeting system so that everyone inflates their figures such that none can be trusted. The result of this is programmatic bloat, wasted national treasure, and a profound lack of trust by the American people for a system that is supposed to be providing for their common defense. Consider also the case of the A12 bomber. When briefed by Navy officers on the program, senior Defense department officials always asked, "How is the program doing?" They always received positive responses, up until the point that it became clear that the program was a billion dollars over budget, behind schedule, and had not produced anything. When confronted with this reality they canceled the program, asking the Navy indignantly, "Why didn't you tell us you were behind schedule and over budget?" The Navy answer was, "you never asked us that question." From such lies and spinning of the truth much treasure is squandered, and great empires crumble into the sand.

This tension of truth and lies continues at the level of grand strategy. Thinking back again to our parable of Regulus, he was confronted with an ethical choice in his jail cell in Carthage. The Carthaginians wanted him to tell what Regulus knew to be a lie, that the war was unwinnable and that Rome should capitulate. They offered Regulus substantial reward for lying. If he did, he would be reunited with his family, hailed as the bringer of peace, and allowed to die in peace at home, secure in the knowledge that he had stopped a war. Regulus was faced with several choices. Not only was he presented with the Carthaginian deal, which he could have rejected out of hand, he also saw and accepted an opportunity to deceive (lie to) the Carthaginians. He told them he would do their bidding and convince Rome to sue for peace. In fact he did the opposite. Was his lie just? Did it serve the common good of Rome? Our judgment is yes. Regulus saw the truth, that Rome would win this war. He could have taken an Augustinian (anachronistically, I realize)

disaster

## **Conclusion**

In a democratic state, ethics and morality will be central issues that affect the formulation of strategy. Our moral and ethical structure is a result of our cultural values, and in that sense a reflection of our society as a whole. The tensions of ethical choice assail us at every turn of our military life, and we have many different paths for our morality to take us. Ethics and morality, if properly appreciated and understood, can guide us and sustain us as we navigate uncharted waters filled with tough choices. I believe that the truth is something that will endure and is the foundation of this ethical and moral framework that guides us. It is a rock upon which our morality rests, and the ability to see, know, understand, speak, and carry out the truth, regardless of personal consequences, is a quality towards which every military officer should aspire.

Military officers are human, and so imperfect. Their understanding of the truth and their courage to speak it will not always be perfect. The costs of standing firm in the truth can be steep, but they are costs we must bear. The small lies we tell for various good reasons must be understood for what they are, exceptions to the sanctity of truth. Whenever we do deviate from the truth, we must do so only after careful consideration of the consequences of our actions and full acknowledgment that we are now on thin moral ground. If we let the rationalization of falsehood become commonplace, it will bury us, sweep over us like a typhoon, and destroy not only our lives and civilization, but also everything that is good about us. This is the main moral challenge to military leadership. We ignore the truth at our own peril, and our nation's



## Truth Never Dies

Truth never dies The ages come and go  
The mountains wear away, the stars retire  
Destruction lays earth's mighty cities low,  
And empires, states, and dynasties expire,  
But caught and handled onward by the wise,  
Truth never dies

Though unreceived and scoffed at through the years,  
Though made the butt of ridicule and jest,  
Though held aloft for mockery and jeers.  
Denied by those of transient power possessed,  
Insulted by the insolence of lies,  
Truth never dies

It answers not It does not take offense,  
But with a mighty silence bides its time,  
As some great cliff that braves the elements  
And lifts through all the storms its head sublime,  
It ever stands, uplifted by the wise,  
And never dies

As rests Sphinx amid Egyptian sands,  
As looms on high the snowy peak and crest.  
As firm and patient as Gibraltar stands,  
So truth, unwearied, waits the era blessed  
When men shall turn to it with great surprise  
Truth never dies <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> William J Bennett ed , The Book of Virtues (New York Simon & Schuster, ) pp 661